Dene Ts'ukeghái Tene Rahesiu
Dene Spruce Root Basketry

Revival of a Tradition

Suzan Marie
Judy Thompson

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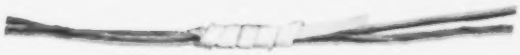
DENE TS'UKEGHÁÍ TENE RAHESIU
DENE SPRUCE ROOT BASKETRY



Revival of a Tradition

SUZAN MARIE
JUDY THOMPSON

Mercury Series
Canadian Ethnology Service
Paper 138

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Front cover photo: Dene spruce root basket (VI-E-111) from the CMC collection, and participants in the first Dene spruce root basketry workshop, held in Sambaa K'e (Trout Lake), Northwest Territories, October 1999. Standing, left to right: Mandy Brown (Instructor), Valerie Jumbo, Violet Sanguez, Angelique Lomen, Sarah Ann Jumbo, Emily Jumbo, Julie Punch, Mrs. Sarah Jumbo, Mary Deneron, Margaret Jumbo, Suzan Marie (Project Coordinator). Seated, back row: Corey Wasp-Colin, Nicole Sanguez; front row: Ernest Lomen, Codi Punch, Natasha Sanguez. Workshop photograph by David Walken. Composite image by Harry Foster.

Back cover photo: Partially completed basket by Margaret Jumbo, Sambaa K'e, 2002, and basketry materials: peeled and split spruce roots and bone awls. Photograph by Harry Foster.

Canada

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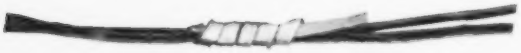
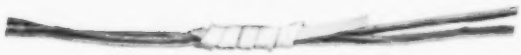
Abstract



Baskets made from coiled spruce roots once were commonplace items in many Dene homes. The craft died out, however, in the nineteenth century, as copper kettles became available through trade with Europeans. By the end of the twentieth century, all that remained to attest to this ancient tradition were a few baskets in museum collections. In 1999, Suzan Marie, a Dene with a passion for the traditional arts of her people, saw a photograph of one of these baskets and initiated a project to reintroduce the lost art of spruce root basketry to small Dene communities.

This book tells the story of this modern revival of a traditional skill, and of the museum collections that were essential to the process. It is richly illustrated with photographs of baskets – both those collected in the nineteenth century and those made recently by a new generation of Dene basket-makers. Also included are detailed descriptions and illustrations of the processes involved in making a basket, from harvesting of spruce roots to coiling technique. This book will be a resource for anyone interested in Dene culture and heritage. It will also serve as a practical guide to artisans wishing to make a Dene spruce root basket.

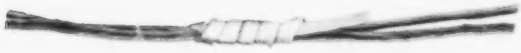
Résumé



Les paniers faits de racines d'épinette tressées ont déjà été monnaie courante dans de nombreux foyers dénés. Toutefois, l'art s'est éteint au XIX^e^ siècle, à mesure que les bouilloires en cuivre faisaient leur apparition, à l'époque du troc avec les Européens. À la fin du XX^e^ siècle, tout ce qui reste pour témoigner de cette ancienne tradition, ce sont quelques paniers qui se trouvent dans les collections des musées. En 1999, Suzan Marie, une Dénée que les arts traditionnels de son peuple passionnent, a vu une photographie d'un de ces paniers, et elle a lancé un projet pour faire revivre l'art oublié de la vannerie en racines d'épinette dans les petites communautés dénées.

Cet ouvrage raconte l'histoire de la renaissance contemporaine de cette technique traditionnelle et des collections de musées, qui ont joué un rôle essentiel dans le processus de récupération de cette tradition. Il est abondamment illustré de photographies de paniers — certains recueillis au XIX^e^ siècle et d'autres récemment réalisés par une nouvelle génération de vannières. On y trouve également des descriptions détaillées et des illustrations des procédés de fabrication des paniers, allant de la cueillette des racines d'épinette à la technique de l'enroulement. Ce livre constitue une ressource pour quiconque s'intéresse à la culture et au patrimoine des Dénés. Il peut aussi servir de guide pratique pour les artisanes et les artisans qui désirent faire un panier en racines d'épinette déné.

Table of Contents



Introduction 1

Section I: The Dene Spruce-Root Basketry Tradition 5

Section II: Revival of a Tradition 17

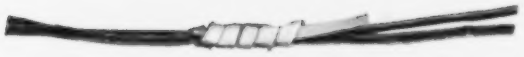
Section III: Making a Basket 27

Materials 28

Technique 30

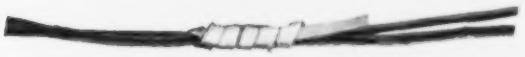
Acknowledgements 37

Endnotes 41



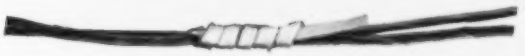
To all Dene people, whatever your grandparents or your aunts or your uncles taught you about your arts and crafts, please hang on to it and don't let it get lost.

(Margaret Jumbo, Sambaa Ke'e, March 2001)



This book is dedicated to my children, Renelita and Christopher. I am honoured to be your mother. You have given me great purpose and a vision to keep our culture alive.

(Suzan Marie, Yellowknife, May 2002)



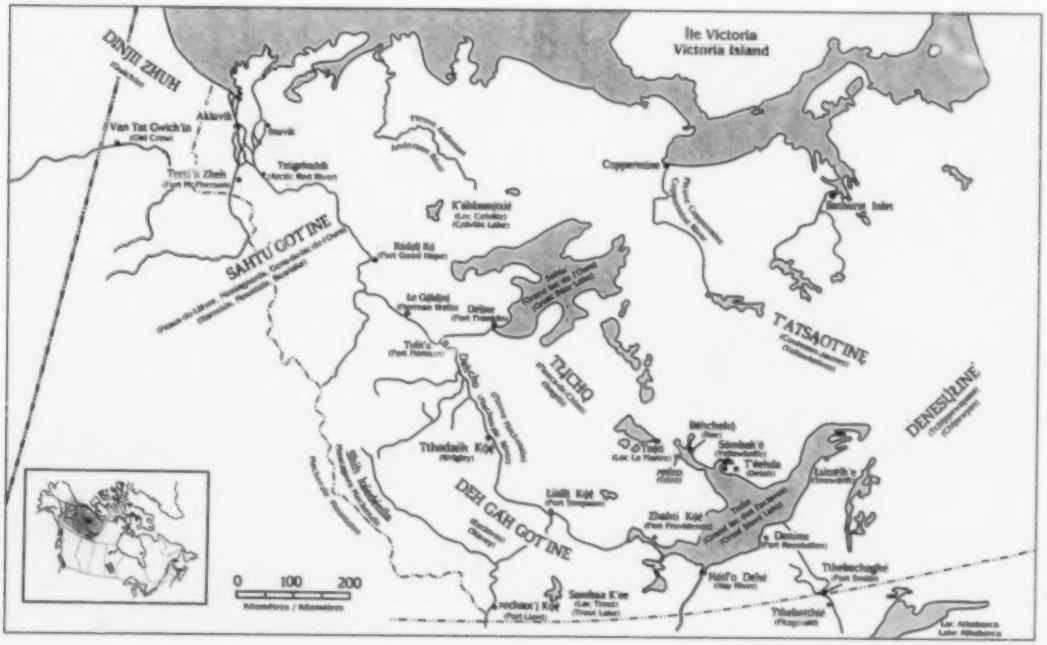
Introduction

When, late in the eighteenth century, European explorers and fur traders first penetrated the region today known as Canada's Northwest Territories, they encountered an independent and self-reliant people who had occupied this land for centuries. In their own, Athabaskan, languages, these people referred to themselves as "Dene".[1]

The Dene were fishermen and hunters who lived in small family groups and traveled frequently in response to the changing seasons and the movements of animals. They could carry little with them that was not essential for survival, nor did they have the leisure to produce luxury items. It was in making the practical necessities of everyday life – things like clothing, tools, containers and snowshoes – that the Dene expressed their creativity and mastery of technical skills.

Figure 1

Map showing Dene groups and communities referred to in text.



Introduction

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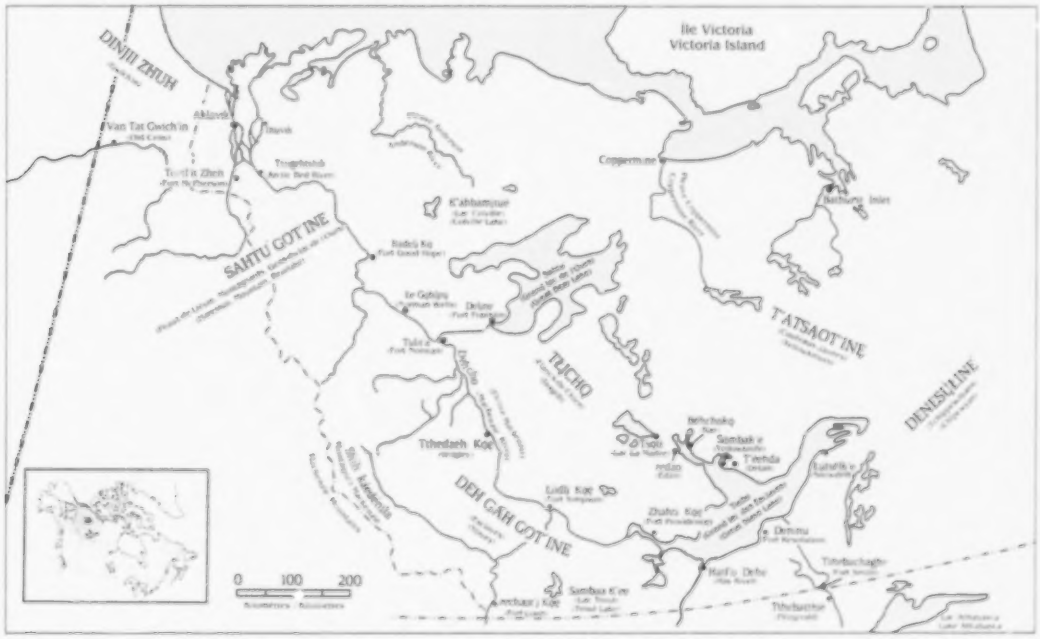
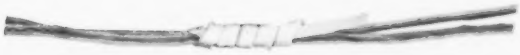
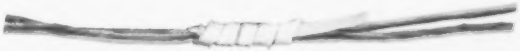


This book concerns an element of Dene culture that once was commonplace, but today is little known. In the eighteenth century, baskets made from coiled spruce roots were standard equipment in many Dene homes. These baskets were coiled and stitched in a way that made them watertight, and they were used for carrying water, as drinking cups, and especially as cooking vessels.



When I first went to Sambaa K'e, I interviewed the elders to see if they could remember the coiling technique, and they could not recall their mothers or their grandmothers doing it.

(Suzan Marie, January 2002)



In cooking, the basketry "kettle" was filled with water, and then red-hot rocks that had been heated in a fire were dropped in (using wooden tongs) until the water boiled. Fish, meat or other ingredients were then added to the liquid, and the mixture simmered until it was judged ready to eat. During the cooking, the water was kept hot by replacing cooling rocks with others newly heated in the fire.

By the early 1800s, the European fur trade had expanded into Dene territory. Among the goods traders brought with them were brass and copper kettles. These were durable and very efficient for carrying and boiling water and cooking food, and they were much in demand by the Dene. Once a family owned a metal kettle, or could borrow one from a neighbour, the need for coiled basketry diminished. Within a few decades, Dene spruce-root basketry was a dying art and, eventually, the skills needed to make this type of basket were passed no longer from one generation to the next.

By the end of the twentieth century, few Dene even knew that basketry made from coiled spruce roots once had been part of their culture. A small number of baskets had been preserved in museum collections, however, and in 1999, Suzan Marie – a Dene with a passion for the traditional arts of her people – saw a

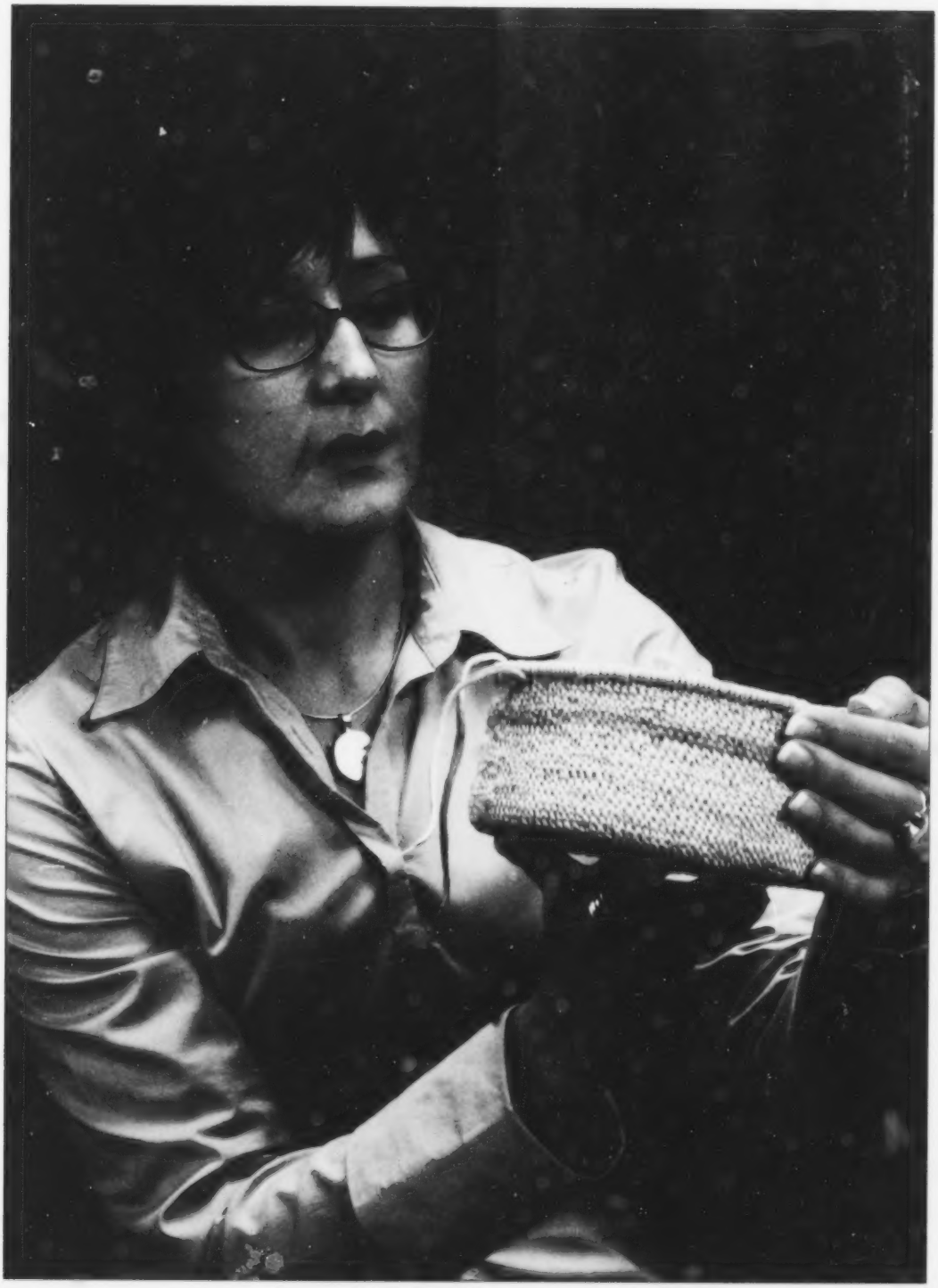


Figure 2

Suzan Marie photographed in January 2002 at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, with basket made by Angele Jumbo of Sambaa K'e. Photograph by Harry Foster.

photograph of one of these. Her interest was sparked, and she determined to restore the knowledge and techniques of making coiled spruce root basketry to Dene communities.

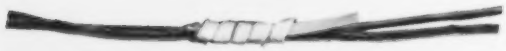
She foresaw that such a project would have cultural and educational benefits and that it would stimulate interest and pride in a unique cultural heritage, both within Dene communities and among the general public. There was economic potential as well: well-made baskets, marketed as collector's items, could provide opportunities and income for artists and artisans – particularly those living in small, isolated, communities.

With funding from the Department of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development, Government of the Northwest Territories, Suzan Marie organized workshops in several small Dene communities between the fall of 1999 and the spring of 2002. The workshops involved people of all ages and both sexes (although the majority were women) and included instruction in the gathering and preparation of spruce root as well as in coiling technique.

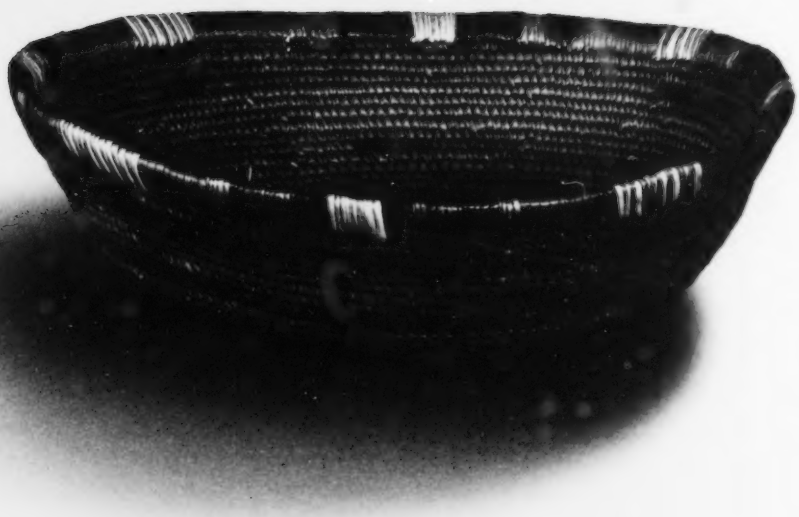
This book tells the story of this modern revival of an ancient craft, and of the museum collections that were essential to the process. It is written as a testament to the creativity of Dene basket makers past and present, and in the hope that this skill, and the cultural knowledge it draws upon, will never again be lost to the Dene.

Judy Thompson
Canadian Museum of Civilization
May 2002

Section I



The Dene Spruce-Root Basketry Tradition



The earliest written descriptions of Dene spruce-root basketry are found in the journals of Alexander Mackenzie, an explorer who, late in the eighteenth century, was the first white man to travel through the heart of Dene territory.[2] Mackenzie's first contact with the Dene of the Mackenzie Valley came on a Sunday morning in July 1789, when he encountered "five Families" of Slavey and Dogrib at a camp near the mouth of the Great Bear River. Mackenzie described their cooking pots as follows:

> *The Vessel which serve them to cook their Victuals are something in the Shape of a Gourd wide & bilged below & narrower at Top made of walup Basket work, but so close that it holds Water with any other thing they chuse to put in it. They make it boil by putting a sufficiency of Red hot Stones into it. Those Vessels contain from 2 to 6 Gals.*

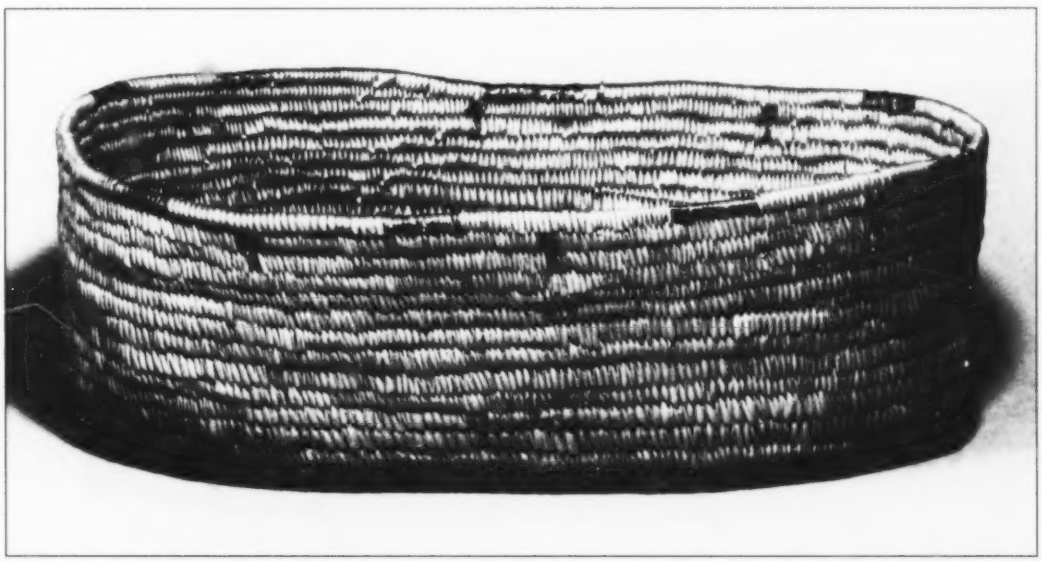


Figure 3 – Cooking vessel?

Slavey, 1860
Spruce root, goose quill
Collected by Bernard Ross, Fort Simpson, 1862
Length 33.5cm (13"); Width 23cm (9")
National Museums of Scotland – 848.45

The information that this basket was used for cooking came from Ross, its collector. Its shape and size do not seem right for this purpose, however – especially when we compare it with Alexander Mackenzie's description of a gourd-shaped "kettle" large enough to hold four to six gallons of water.

The basket is decorated with goose quills dyed red, purple and brown. These are used instead of spruce roots in wrapping sections of the rim, and on the upper sides of the basket.

By "walup", Mackenzie meant "watape", and in a footnote in his published *Journal*, he explained what this word meant:

> *Watape is the name given to the divided roots of the spruce-fir, which the natives weave into a degree of compactness that renders it capable of containing a fluid.*

A few years later, in 1792, when Mackenzie was traveling through what is now British Columbia, en route to the Pacific Ocean, his food supplies ran dangerously low. A Dene couple he had engaged as guides generously offered to make him a soup from fish-roe. Mackenzie's journal entry marking this occasion graphically

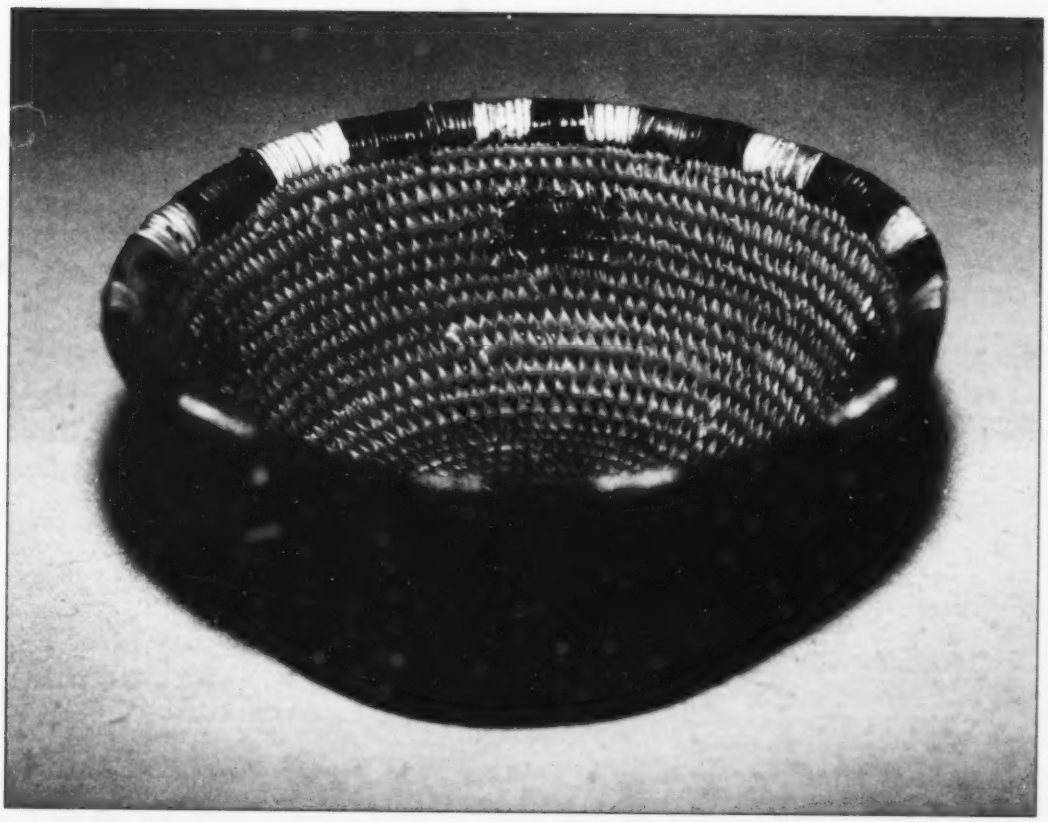


Figure 4 – Bowl

Dene, 1859
Spruce root with goose
or porcupine quills
Collected by Robert Campbell, Fort Chipewyan, 1859
Width 23cm (9"); Height 16.5cm (6-1/2")
National Museums of Scotland – 480.10

This bowl is one of a set of four. It is decorated with red, blue and white porcupine quills, applied to sections of the rim.

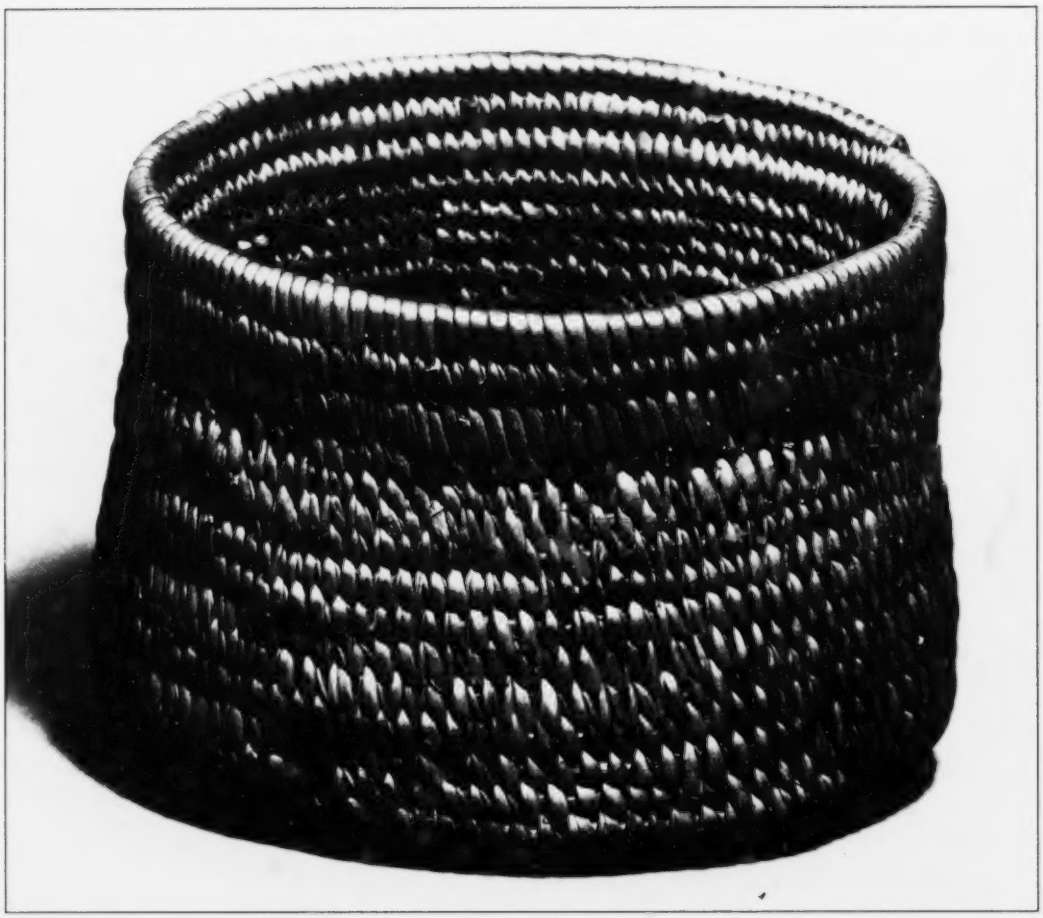


Figure 5 – Cup
Slavey, 1862
Collected by Bernard Ross, Fort Simpson, 1862
Height 9.5cm (3-3/4"); Diameter 7cm (2-3/4")
National Museums of Scotland – 848.46

describes the use of a spruce-root kettle in cooking. It is also the oldest recorded Dene cooking recipe:

> *"He took the roes out of a bag, and having bruised them between two stones, put them in water to soak. His wife then took a handful of dry grass in her hand, with which she squeezed them through her fingers; in the mean time her husband was employed in gathering wood to make a fire, for the purpose of heating stones. When she had finished her operation, she filled a watape kettle nearly full of water and poured the roes into it. When the stones were sufficiently heated, some of them were put into the kettle, and the others were thrown in from time to time, till the water was in a state of boiling: the woman also continued stirring the contents of the kettle, til they were brought to a thick consistency; the stones were then taken out, and the whole was seasoned with about a pint of strong rancid oil.*[3]

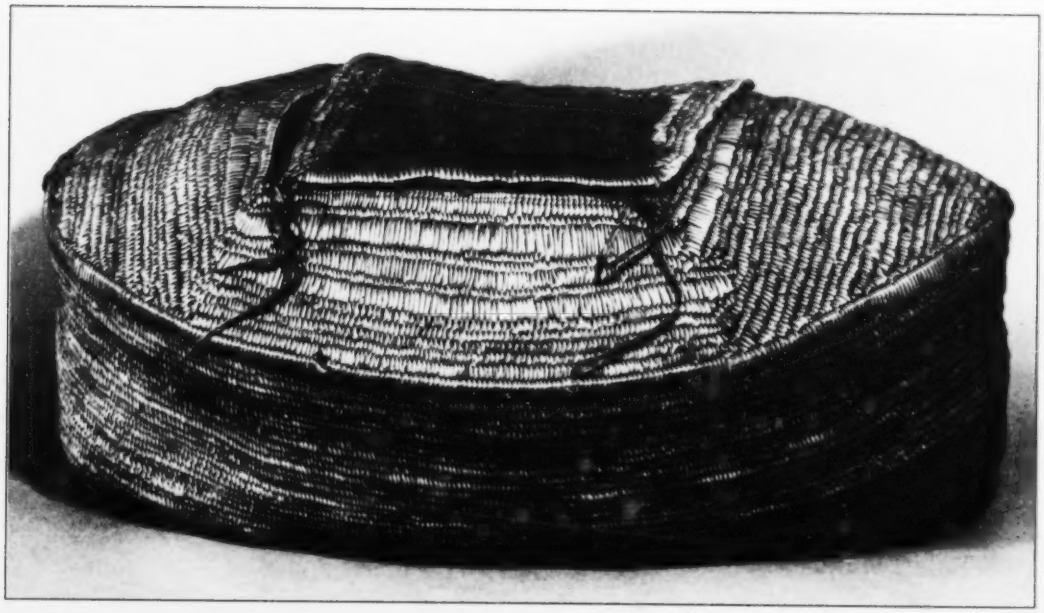
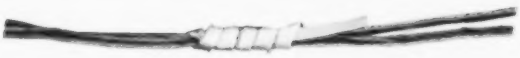


Figure 6 – Covered basket
Slavey, 1862
Collected by Bernard Ross, Fort Simpson, 1862
Length 51cm (20"); Width 30.5cm (12")
National Museums of Scotland – 848.44

Alexander Mackenzie's "voyage" through Dene territory opened up a region rich in furs to the European fur trade. During the half-century after his 1789 expedition, several trading posts were established along the natural transportation route he had followed. George Keith, a trader at what was later to be Déline on Great Bear Lake, recorded another description of Dene using coiled baskets for cooking. In 1812, he wrote:

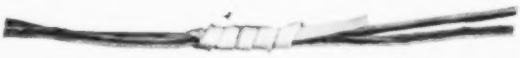
> *Their boilers … are made of watap interlaced with willow so closely and neatly that the least sediment, with the swelling of the wood, makes it very tight. Into this vessel, they put the quantity of water required, after which they heat this water almost to a boiling state with stones heated in the fire amongst ashes. The fish, scales and all, is cut up and put into the kettle, and immediately after another lot of hot stones is placed above the fish, and the kettle covered with pieces of wood or bark, and remains so until the stones are cooled, by which time the fish is cooked. The fish is then emptied into a wood or bark dish and often upon worn out fir branches ...* [4]

Traders like Keith brought a variety of imported goods – guns, tea, tobacco, textiles, and copper and brass kettles – into Dene territories, with the intention of exchanging them for provisions and furs. The Dene were quick to appreciate the durability and efficiency of metal kettles and eagerly traded for them. Although not everyone could afford a kettle initially, the introduction of this new commodity to the Dene economy ultimately spelled the demise of spruce-root basketry. A transition to copper kettles for cooking was apparent already by the first decades of the nineteenth century. Keith noted that both spruce-root and copper kettles were in use by the Dene of the Mackenzie River region in 1812.[5] He also commented on the fact that while not everyone possessed a metal kettle, those who did have one shared it with others.



I felt grateful that the museums had housed and protected the baskets, because without them we wouldn't be able to go back to the originals, or have the photographs, or know how the baskets were made and what they were used for. I think that's really important – without having an actual basket, it would be really hard to revive the spruce-root basketry technique.

(Suzan Marie, January 2002)



In 1862, a half-century after George Keith made these observations, Bernard Ross, another trader in the area, wrote that "Wattape Kettles...manufactured out of...the root of the white spruce, split to a convenient thickness...were, previously to the advent of whites into these regions, in general use throughout the Mackenzie River District, for culinary purposes". He noted further that at the time of his writing, these baskets had "completely fallen into desuetude" in the Mackenzie River region.[6]

Fortunately, Ross and a few of his contemporaries collected examples of Dene spruce-root basketry for the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh (see, for example, Figures 3 to 6), and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Today, these baskets are vitally important sources of information about Dene spruce root basketry. They come to us virtually unchanged from the hands of their makers, and they are doubly significant for being what museum curators call "documented" or "provenanced" artifacts, in which information about the collector, the date of collection and the culture of origin was recorded and preserved along with the objects themselves.

Other examples of Dene coiled spruce-root basketry reached museums by more circuitous routes, and collection histories were lost along the way. In some cases, these "orphaned" artifacts can be linked to the better-documented examples

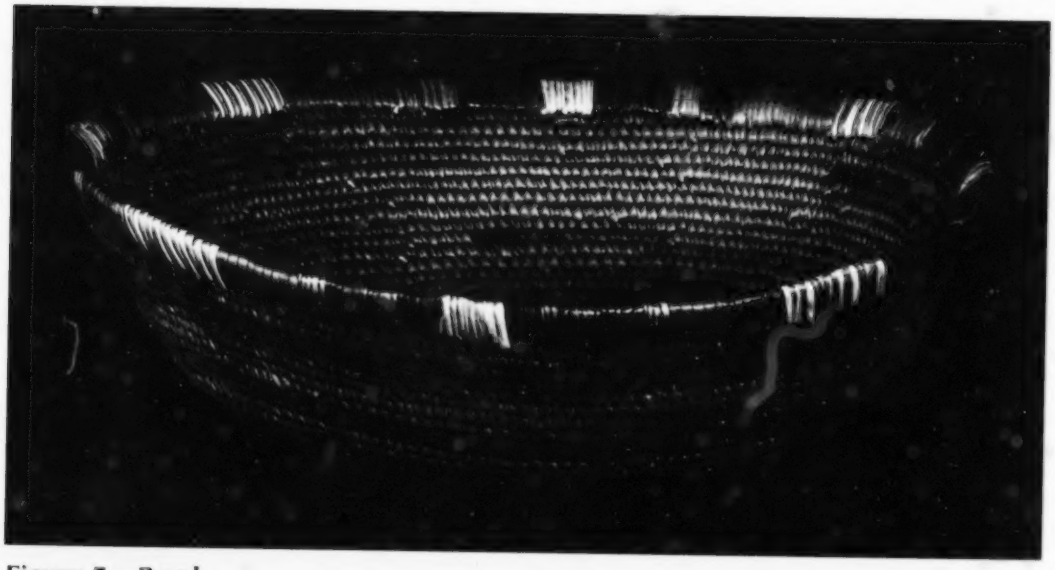


Figure 7 – Bowl

Dene type, ca. 1860
Acquired by the British Museum before 1868
Spruce roots with goose and/or porcupine quills
Diameter: 20cm (8")
British Museum – 2647

The collection history of this basket is unknown, but it bears a close similarity to four baskets sent to the Royal Scottish Museum in 1859 from Fort Chipewyan (see Figure 4). Small round bowls of this type are the most common form of Dene spruce-root basketry in museum collections. Most of these little bowls are beautifully made, with fine, even coils and regular stitching.

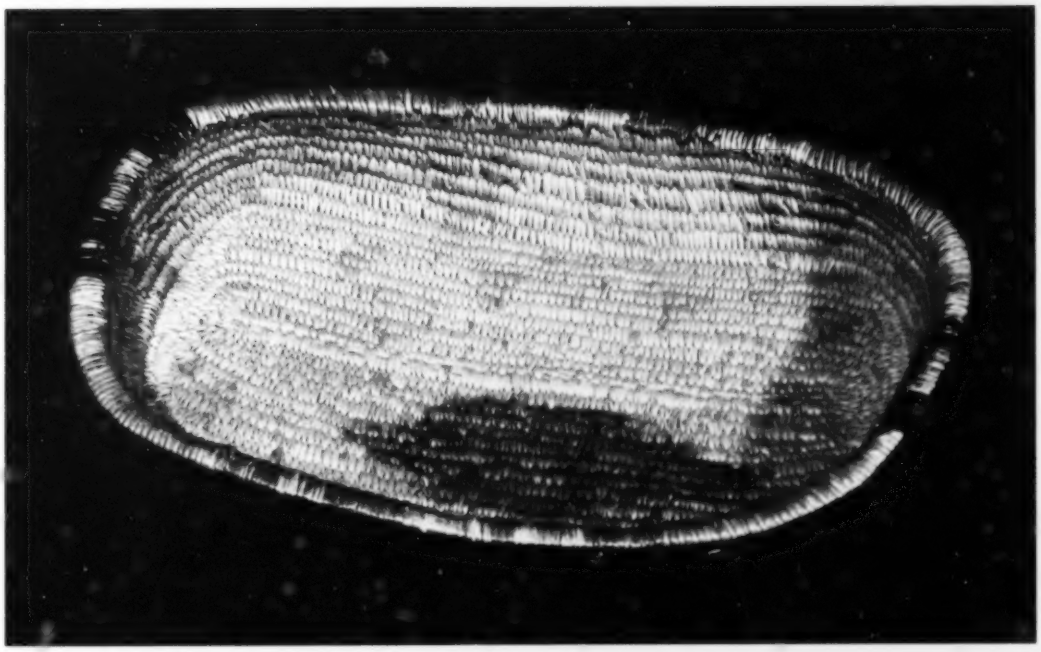


Figure 8 – Basket

Dene type, late 19th century
Spruce root with goose and/or porcupine quills
Collected by P. H. West, ca.1907?
Length 25.5cm (10"), Width 17.4cm (6-3/4")
Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre – 996.8.82

The collector of this basket and the one shown in Figure 9 was a Northwest Mounted Policeman who was stationed at Lesser Slave Lake in northern Alberta around 1907. His collection includes a wide range of Aboriginal material, unfortunately all lacking provenance. This basket is presumed to be Dene because it compares closely to the Slavey basket illustrated in Figure 3 (collected by fur trader Bernard Ross in 1862).

because of close similarities in appearance and method of construction. For example, several beautifully made but poorly documented small bowls can be assumed to be of Dene manufacture, circa 1860, because they bear a striking similarity to the bowls in the Royal Scottish Museum which were sent from Fort Chipewyan in 1859 (see cover image and Figures 4 and 7).[7] Similarly, an oval basket (Figure 8) in the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Yellowknife, closely resembles a Slavey basket (Figure 3) collected by Bernard Ross in 1862.

When, in 1862, Bernard Ross observed that the Dene were no longer using spruce-root baskets, he was writing from Fort Simpson, a centre of activity in

I can't tell you how happy I am to see all this work our elders did – none of them are here with us, but we're still going to try to carry on with what is left for us.

(Margaret Jumbo, March 2002)

the northern fur trade, and a place where changes to Dene culture – as a result of contact with Europeans and access to trade goods – were greatest. Traditional ways, including the making of spruce-root baskets, undoubtedly continued for some time in more remote regions. Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, Dene coiled spruce-root baskets probably were made but rarely, and then only by older women who had learned the craft in their

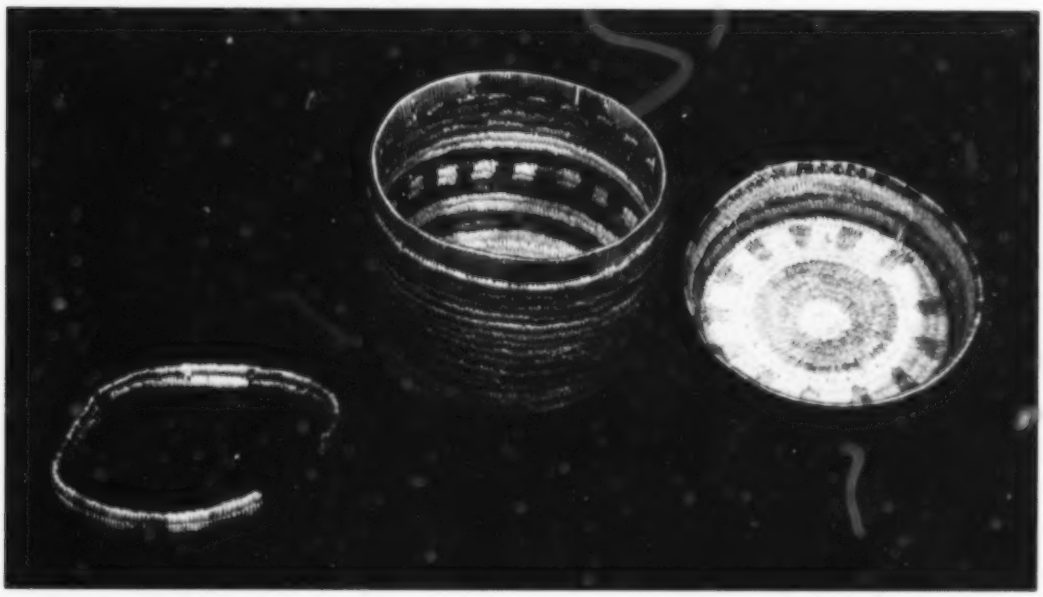


Figure 9 – Basket with lid

Dene type, late 19th century
Spruce root, moose hide
Collected by P.H. West, ca.1907?
Height (with lid) 16.0 cm (6-1/4"), Diameter 16.3 cm (6-1/2")
Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre – 996.8.83

The decorative work on this basket uses dyed spruce roots. The colours have faded on the outside of the basket, but are still bright on the inside. The handle, made from two lengths of smoked moose hide wrapped with spruce roots, has become detached, but was originally attached to the basket about 3.5 cm (1-1/2") below the rim.

Figure 10 – Canoe model
Chipewyan type, late 19th century?
Spruce root
Collected ca.1930 for the Hudson's Bay Company Museum Collection
Length: 72cm (28-1/4"); Width: 15cm (6")
Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature – HBC 2527

youth. The baskets they made would have been intended for purposes other than cooking or serving food, and some undoubtedly were made for sale to non-Dene.

Few baskets collected during this later period have survived. They are scattered in a half-dozen or so museums and most are not well documented. There are several small round bowls of the type seen in Figures 4 and 7, but these later

examples are less finely executed.[8] There also are a few styles not seen in earlier collections: for example, a round basket with a fitted lid (Figure 9), and a skilfully made basketry model of a Chipewyan spruce or birchbark canoe (Figure 10).

Section II

Revival of a Tradition

Figure 11
Mandy Brown, Nlaka'pamux basket-maker from Lytton, B.C., instructor at the first workshop, held in Sambaa K'e, October, 1999. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

The first workshop to revive the Dene art of coiled spruce-root basketry was held in the fall of 1999 in Sambaa K'e (Trout Lake), a small Dehcho Dene community situated about 160 kilometers south of Fort Simpson. Although knowledge of how to make coiled basketry had died out in Sambaa K'e as it had in other Dene communities, some people still harvested spruce roots, which they

What a real treat it was to meet Mandy Brown. She came to Sambaa K'e after we had harvested the root and we were all ready. She brought her cedar root and demonstrated with her material, and we worked with our material, the spruce root. Mandy did a great job.

(Suzan Marie, January 2002)

peeled and split for use in sewing baskets made from birchbark. In other words, knowledge that was critically important to the making of a coiled spruce-root basket was still present in Sambaa K'e.

The workshop was conducted in two stages. First, in late August 1999, a group made excursions over two days onto the land to harvest a supply of spruce roots. The roots were stored in plastic bags and kept cool until October, when the participants gathered for instruction on how to prepare the roots and how to make a coiled basket. As no Dene was found, in Sambaa K'e or elsewhere, who knew the coiling technique, Suzan Marie invited Mandy Brown – a Nlaka'pamux elder and master basket-maker from central

Figure 12

Participants at the first spruce root basketry workshop, held at Sambaa K'e (Trout Lake) October 1999. Left to right: Mandy Brown, Sarah Ann Jumbo, Julie Punch, Margaret Jumbo, Valerie Jumbo, Mrs. Sarah Jumbo, Emily Jumbo. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

Figure 13

Participants at a workshop held in the Sahtu Dene community of Déline (Fort Franklin) on Great Slave Lake, January 2002. Left to right, back row: Marlene Kenny, Donna Takazo, Lee Ann Takazo; front row: Matilda Modeste, Kaylene Kenny, Cyre Yukon. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

British Columbia – to join the workshop and instruct the participants. Photographs, descriptions and other information about nineteenth century Dene baskets in museum collections were provided to the artisans as they worked.

This first, very successful, workshop was followed by one held in November 2001 in Fort Good Hope, a Sahtu Dene community on the Mackenzie River. A third workshop was held in January 2002, in the Sahtu Dene village of Déline, on Great Bear Lake. In February 2002, Suzan Marie returned to Sambaa K'e to work with basket-makers there on yet another aspect to making a Dene basket: the use of dyed porcupine or bird quills for decoration.

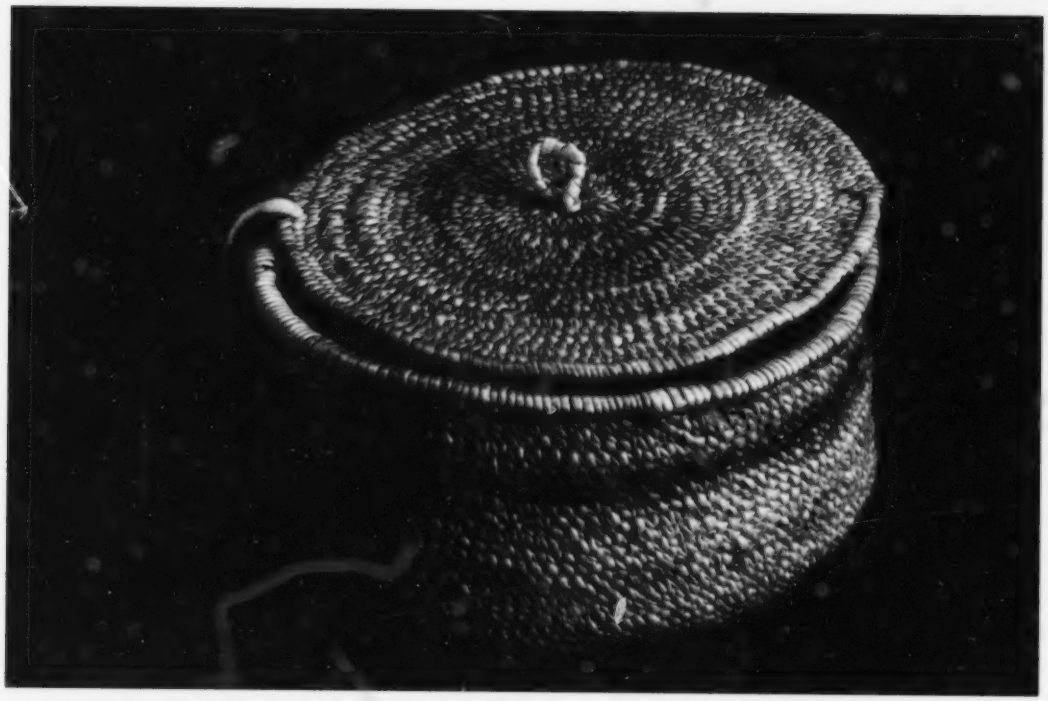


Figure 14

Basket, made by Angele Jumbo, Sambaa K'e, 2001. Spruce root with ties of smoked moose hide. Roots darkened by freezing are used to produce a decorative stripe. Diameter 16cm (6-1/4"); Height 7.5cm (3"). Photograph by Harry Foster.

Figure 15

Angele Jumbo, at the Sambaa K'e workshop, October 1999. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

Angele Jumbo is a Dehcho Dene (South Slavey) elder living in Sambaa K'ee. She was born on May 10, 1913 and has been working at skills such as birchbark basketry, sewing of hide clothing, and knitting since she was a teenager.

Figure 16

Margaret Jumbo with basket made March 2002 for the collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

Margaret Jumbo is a Dehcho Dene (South Slavey) wife, mother, and craftperson. She was born on January 30, 1953 and spent her early years in Fort Simpson, moving to Sambaa K'e in the early 1970s. She is accomplished at many traditional Dene crafts – hide tanning, porcupine quillwork, embroidery and beadwork, and sewing clothing (jackets, moccasins and mukluks). She began doing this work as a young girl, taught by older women. As a child she went along on expeditions to gather spruce roots which were used in sewing birchbark baskets, but the workshop held in Sambaa K'e in October 1999 was her first experience with coiled spruce-root basketry. Since then, she has made a number of fine baskets and is teaching her daughters Valerie and Norma the craft.

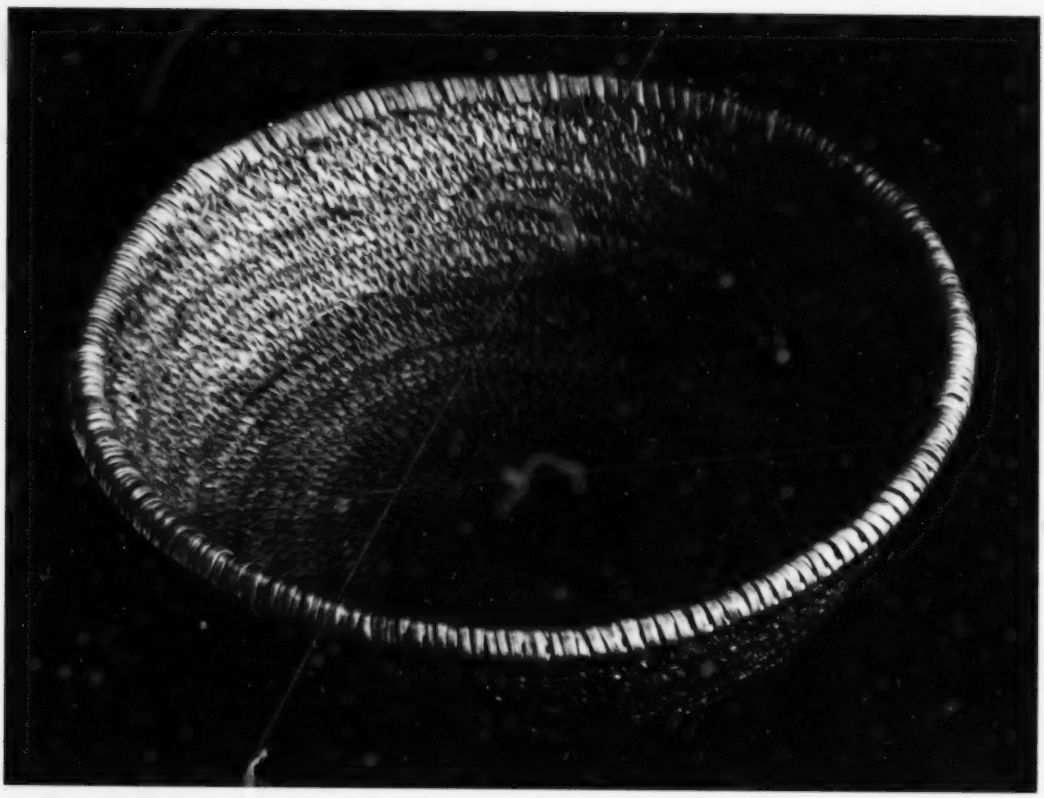
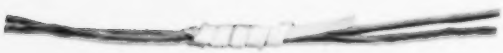


Figure 17
Coiled spruce root basket made by Margaret Jumbo, Sambaa K'e, Northwest Territories, 2001. Photograph by Harry Foster.



I heard that Dene used to make these baskets in the past, and I'm trying to bring it back to life.

(Margaret Jumbo, March, 2002)

The workshops succeeded as Suzan Marie had hoped they would. Soon, a number of women were working independently on coiled basketry, experimenting with form, size and materials and producing well-made, original works. Mothers were passing on newly learned skills to their daughters and, in a few cases, younger women who had participated in a workshop went home and taught

Figure 18

Mary Barnaby, Fort Good Hope, Northwest Territories, with basket she made in 2001, after watching Suzan Marie demonstrate the technique at a public event in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories.

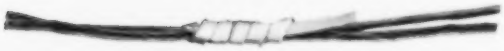
Mary Barnaby is a Sahtu Dene, born June 18, 1932 in Dawson, Yukon Territory.

Figure 19

Mrs. Sarah Jumbo of Sambaa K'e digging spruce roots, August 1999. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

I find when you have a workshop and you bring women together, there's a really strong sense of working together and a kind of natural competition that happens – you meet, you laugh, you get energized...your self esteem increases, your awareness of who you are as a distinctively Dene person emerges.

(Suzan Marie, January 2002)



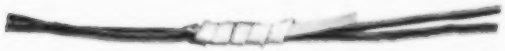
their mothers the craft. A new generation of Dene artists in basketry was emerging.

The benefits went beyond the learning of a practical skill. Traditional knowledge and techniques – such as those involved in harvesting and preparing spruce roots – were reinforced, and communicated to a broader audience than might otherwise have been the case. In the workshop setting, Dene language skills were exercised and cultural information exchanged, as elders talked about materials and techniques and remembered earlier times. As memories revived, there were hints that spruce-root basketry had not been completely forgotten by the Dene. In one instance, for example, a participant in the Déline workshop, Marlene Kenny, showed her mother, Marie Therese Kenny, the basket she was making. Upon seeing Marlene's work, Marie Therese recalled that *her* mother had had a spruce-root basket which she used as a snuff box – she remembered this basket as being a small, round container with a fitted lid. More such stories surely will be told in the months to come, as word and knowledge of Dene spruce-root basketry spreads within Dene communities.

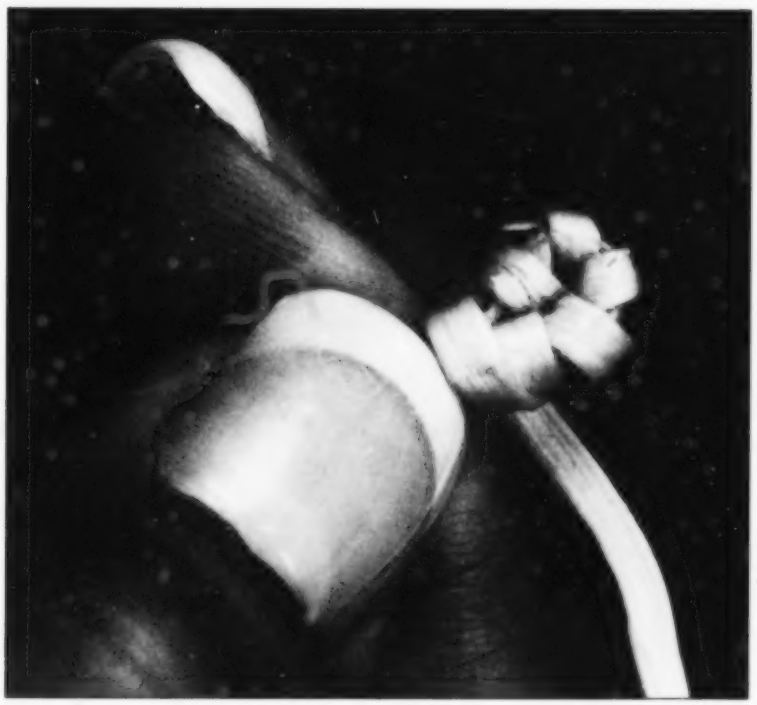
Figure 20

Judy Lafferty scraping spruce roots at the Fort Good Hope workshop, November 2001. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

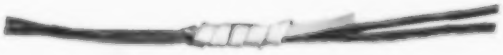
Section III



Making a Basket

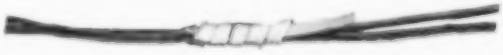


Materials



Dene coiled baskets are made from the roots of the white spruce, a tree that is found throughout Dene territory. In the past, the Dene used spruce roots in many ways, particularly for sewing the seams of canoes and baskets made from birchbark. Birchbark baskets continue to be made in the traditional manner by a few Dene artisans today, and so the knowledge of how to harvest and prepare these roots has never been lost. Helen Kotchea of Samba'a K'e is one of the women who carry on this tradition. Suzan Marie asked her the following questions about how roots are harvested:

> One of the challenges is to get enough spruce root harvested in the summer so you have it for the winter months.
>
> *(Suzan Marie, January 2002)*



What is the best season of the year to harvest roots?

The early spring is the best time. The roots are easy to peel then. Later on, close to the fall, they are kind of hard to peel.

Who taught you how to harvest roots?

I learned from my mother, and other older women.

What's the best kind of day to harvest roots?

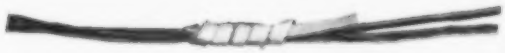
A clear day is best.

How do you decide where to go to harvest roots?

I live here, so I know where the good spots are. It's best where the moss is thin. When it's thick the roots are too far down.

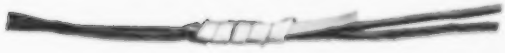
What kind of tree is best?

Medium to large spruce trees are best.



As a child, I used to get roots with old people and I always found it very difficult to work with the roots, especially the splitting ... but now that I am older, it's really simple.

(Margaret Jumbo, March 2002)



Does it hurt the tree to take its roots?

Some people say it does. Some trees are dying when you pull too many roots from them. You should just take enough for a couple of baskets from one tree.

What do you use to dig the roots up?

We use a stick. We chop it really thin and we make it pointed and we dig the ground with that. That's what Mum taught us.

Where do you start to dig the roots?

I start about 3 feet from the tree.

What do you do with the root after you have harvested it?

We just roll it up and put it in a plastic bag...you keep it damp until you're ready to use it. Usually you keep it a couple of days.

How do you peel it?

You just use your fingernail, you just rip it right off.

Which end do you start splitting from?

You start from the smaller end. You can split it once, twice or three times. It depends how big the root is.

How do you keep the roots after you've split them?

You roll them up and let them dry. If you keep it damp it gets mouldy. You soak them in water when you're ready to use them.

Figure 21
Splitting the root

Basketry Technique

The technique used in making a Dene spruce-root basket involves wrapping a length of peeled and split spruce root around a bundle of two or three strips of the same material. In basketry terminology this technique is known as coiling, on a splint foundation.[9]

The roots are soaked briefly in water before they are used – they are more flexible when they are damp. The work begins at the centre of the base, and the basket is built up in a spiral fashion, with the wrapping element passing through the foundation of the preceding coil at every turn, stitching the coils together. On

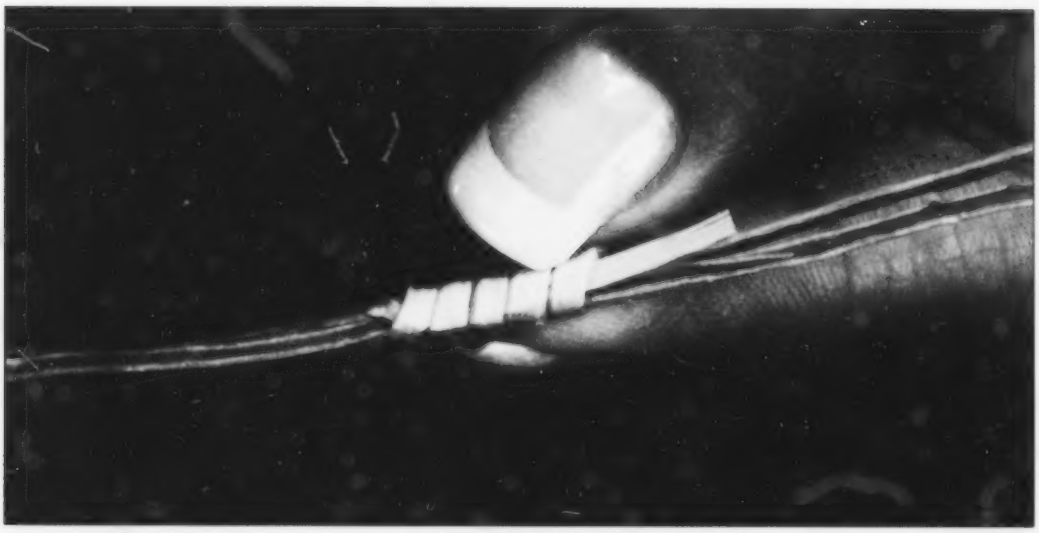


Figure 22

The coiling is started by wrapping a length of flexible, split root in a spiral fashion around a "bundle" of two lengths of split root (the foundation). Note that the end of the wrapping splint is secured by being laid along the foundation for a short distance and included in the wrapping.

nineteenth century baskets, the sewing is compact, so that the foundation is not visible on the finished basket.

The main tool required for this work is an awl, used to make a hole through the foundation, in which the wrapping element can then be inserted. In the past, Dene awls were made from animal bones, split and sharpened to a point. Today, although metal awls are widely available and often used, the traditional bone awl is preferred by some basket makers, who note that it holds the opening better and doesn't stain the light-coloured spruce roots. If a metal awl is used, one made from stainless steel is recommended, as iron marks the roots. A knife or pair of scissors is useful as well in basket making, for trimming the end of the sewing splint (if the end is cut at an angle, it slides more easily through the hole made by the awl).

At the rim, the basket may be finished simply by tapering off the foundation and trimming the end of the stitching element flush with the side of the basket. Sometimes the rim is strengthened, or a slightly projecting lip created, by adding a wood splint (red or diamond willow works well) to the foundation.

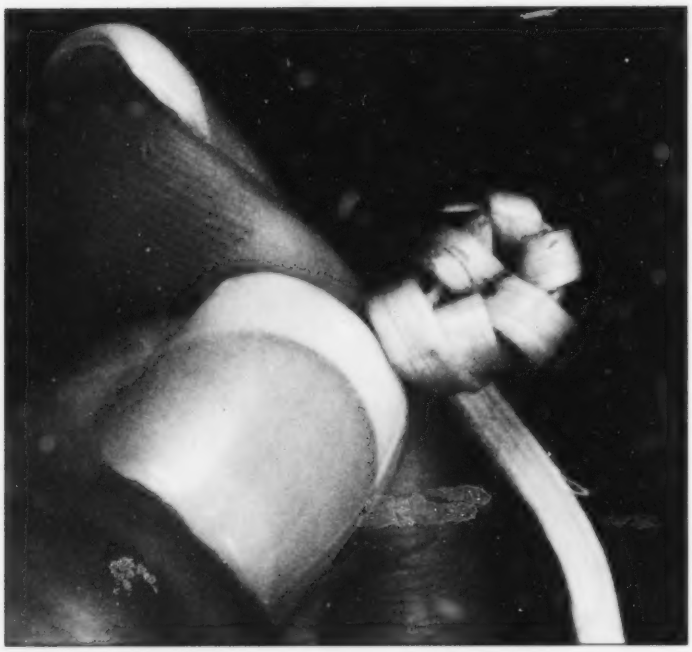


Figure 23

The wrapped section is bent back on itself and secured by tightly wrapping the foundation strands together.

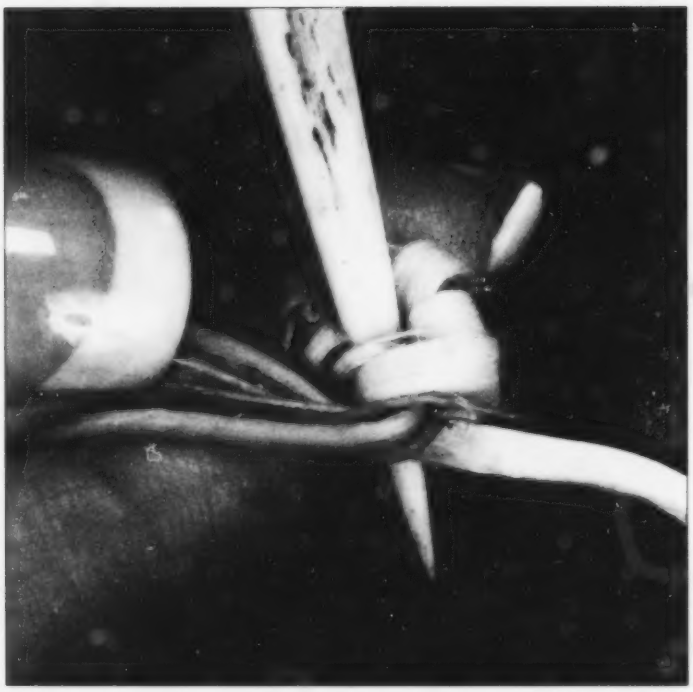


Figure 24

A hole is made with an awl through the middle of the loop. Then the wrapping begins, with the stitching splint drawn through the hole, then over the foundation splints and through the hole again until a complete circuit is made.

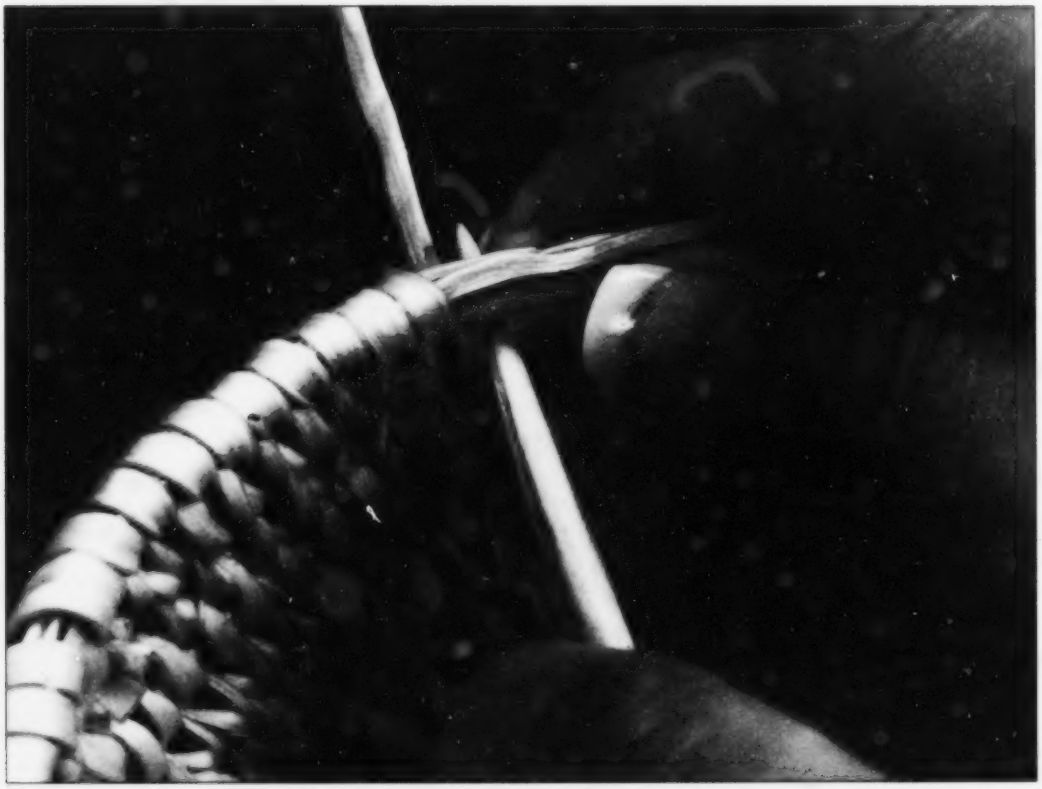


Figure 25
As the basket builds up spirally from the centre of the base, the awl is inserted through the foundation of the preceding coil, making a hole through which the wrapping splint is drawn.

The basket may be decorated using dyed spruce roots or goose or porcupine quills. The oldest baskets in museum collections are decorated with porcupine quills; those collected in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century show an increasing use of dyed spruce root instead of porcupine quills. The dyes used to colour roots and quills on these museum examples have not been analyzed, but it is known that in the nineteenth century, when most of these baskets were made, Dene women used plants, berries, and some new materials brought in by European traders for dyeing. For example, in 1862, Bernard Ross wrote:

Formerly, and sometimes still, the Indians dyed the quills with roots or berries obtained in their native woods – cranberries, moose-berries and wild sorel affording a dull and dark red – alder bark and steel filings staining black, and some roots – those of the wild rhubarb I fancy, yielding yellow. At present, they commonly apply to the wives of the

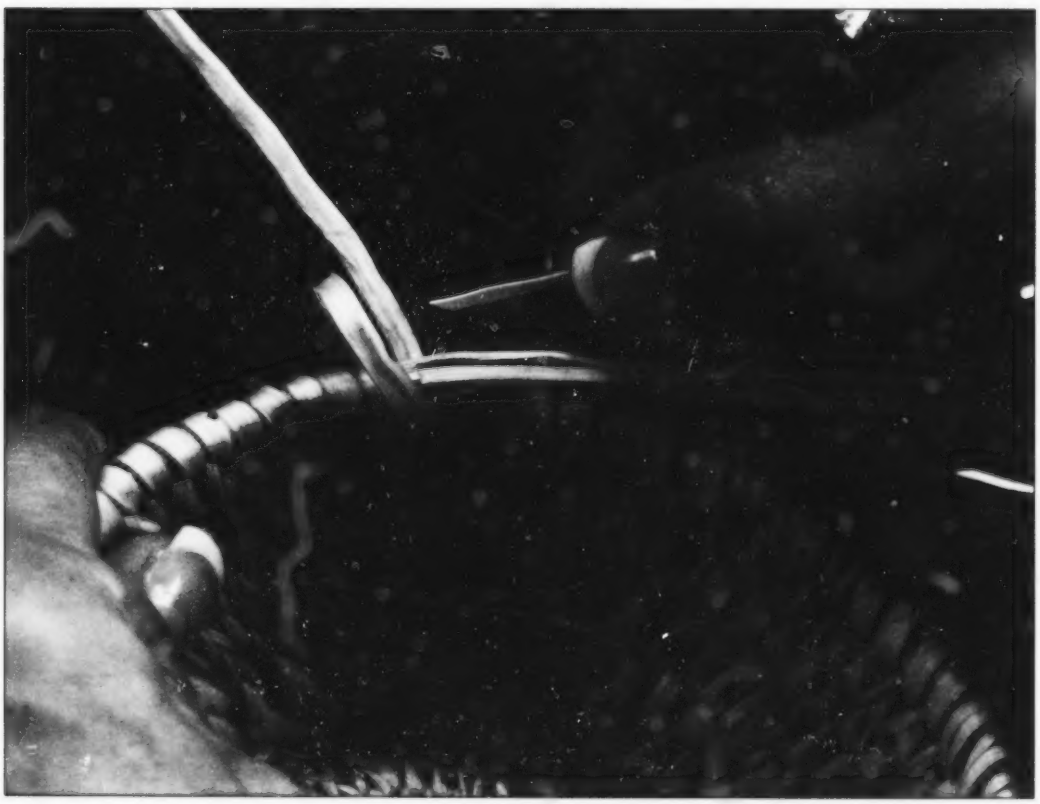
Hudson's Bay Company's servants for cochineal and turmeric [scarlet and yellow dyes used in colouring food] *which, with the dye obtained from* [boiling] *well-worn green cloth, furnishes the limited number of colours in use.*[10]

Today, Dene quill workers use packaged commercial fabric dyes to colour quills and roots. Also, in recent workshops, Dene basket makers have discovered that freezing spruce roots darkens them, and that these darker roots can be used to decorative effect on baskets (see, for example, Figure 14).

Where coloured spruce root is used in decorating a basket, it simply replaces the regular wrapping splint. Quills, however, are applied on top of the wrapping/stitching element. They may be added to the rim, or worked in on the sides of the basket as the coiling progresses. Tweezers are found to be helpful in decorative

Figure 26

New splints are added to the foundation as necessary. This has to be done carefully, since the size of the coil determines the evenness of the work. The shape of the basket can also be modified by making the coil thicker or thinner.



work, for pulling a porcupine quill through the opening made by the awl. Several of the nineteenth century baskets in museum collections have geometric motifs – rectangles or zigzag lines – worked in white, blue, red and brown quills on the sides, or in a striped pattern around the rim.

Figure 27

Margaret Jumbo decorates the rim of this basket by wrapping it with natural white and dyed red and black quills to form a stripe pattern. Tweezers are helpful in pulling the quill through the hole made by the awl. Quillwork may also be added to the basket as the coiling progresses, by wrapping small sections of the coils with dyed porcupine or goose quills.

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Without the support and encouragement of many people - in Dene communities, in government offices and in museums - the project to revive the art of coiled spruce-root basketry would not have succeeded, and this book would not have been written. We would like to acknowledge in particular the following individuals and organizations for their important contributions to this project:

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- Bettilynn Jumbo
- Yvonne Jumbo
- Margaret Jumbo
- Ruby Jumbo
- Mrs. Sarah Jumbo
- Emily Jumbo
- Sarah Ann Jumbo
- Tyler Jumbo
- Valerie Jumbo
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- Ernest Lomen
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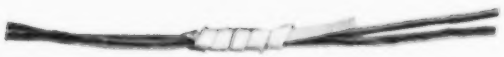
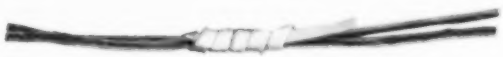
- Kaylene Kenny
- Matilda Modeste
- Donna Takazo
- Leanne Takazo
- Cyre Yukon



A warm Máhsi Cho to all the Elders, Women and Youth who have played a significant role in reviving the spruce-root basket technique. A special thanks to the harvesters of the spruce root. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my family of friends who have provided endless support and encouragement.

(Suzan Marie, Yellowknife, May 2002)



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A generous contribution from the Department of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development, Government of the Northwest Territories, toward the printing of this book is gratefully acknowledged also.

Endnotes

1. The Dene of the Northwest Territories are part of a much larger linguistic/cultural family. Northern Athabaskan-speaking peoples also live in British Columbia, the Yukon, Alaska, and the northern parts of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba.

2. Alexander Mackenzie, *The Journals and Letters of Sir Alexander Mackenzie (1789-1819)*. W. Kaye Lamb, ed. Cambridge England. 1970. The quoted passages which follow are from page 185.

3. Ibid:357

4. George Keith, "Letters to Mr. Roderic McKenzie, 1807-1817". Pages 61-132 in Vol.2 of *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest: Récits de voyages, lettres et rapports in édits relatifs au Nord-Ouest Canadien*. L.R. Masson, ed. 2 vols. Quebec City: A.Coté.

5. Ibid: 116

6. "Remarks on a collection of specimens of aboriginal art from the Mackenzie River District." Forwarded to the Industrial Museum of Scotland in 1862 by Bernard R.Ross.

7. Another very similar bowl is in the McCord Museum, Montreal (ACC1605).

8. Examples include National Museum of the American Indian, Washington 9/4636, Slavey, acquired 1919; Provincial Museum of Alberta, Edmonton H64.12.4, sent from Fort Chipewyan in 1907; and an unprovenanced basket in the McCord Museum, Montreal (ACC1605).

9. Mason, O.T. *American Indian Basketry*. Dover Publications, Inc., New York. 1988: 88,99

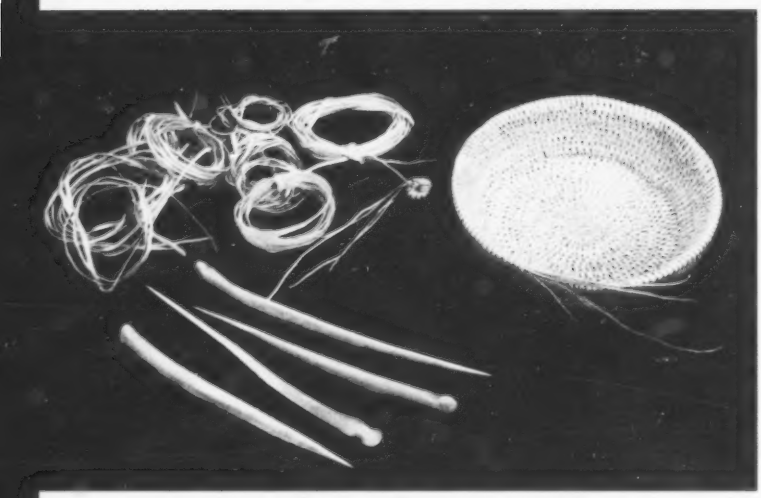
10. "Remarks on a collection of specimens of aboriginal art from the Mackenzie River District." Forwarded to the Industrial Museum of Scotland in 1862 by Bernard R.Ross.

DENE TS'UKEGHÁÍ TENE RAHESI̜
DENE SPRUCE ROOT BASKETRY

Revival of a Tradition

Baskets made from coiled spruce roots once were commonplace items in many Dene homes. The craft died out, however, in the nineteenth century, as copper kettles became available through trade with Europeans. By the end of the twentieth century, all that remained to attest to this ancient tradition were a few baskets in museum collections. In 1999, Suzan Marie, a Dene with a passion for the traditional arts of her people, saw a photograph of one of these baskets and initiated a project to reintroduce the lost art of spruce root basketry to small Dene communities.

This book tells the story of this modern revival of a traditional skill, and of the museum collections that were essential to the process. It is richly illustrated with photographs of baskets – both those collected in the nineteenth century and those made recently by a new generation of Dene basket-makers. Also included are detailed descriptions and illustrations of the processes involved in making a basket, from harvesting of spruce roots to coiling technique. This book will be a resource for anyone interested in Dene culture and heritage. It will also serve as a practical guide to artisans wishing to make a Dene spruce root basket.



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